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The Decline of Old and Rise of New Labor

Martin Skladany

*Editors' Note: This paper was written before Tony Blair's victory
in the last general election.*

The politics of twentieth century Britain have been dominated by the Conservatives. This undeniable fact, interestingly enough, has less than obvious reasons supporting it. This is not to say that there are no explanations for the inability of the Labor Party to win a significant number of general elections, but the reasons are neither obvious nor simple. This inability to win elections coincided with a relatively steady decline in the number and proportion of Labor voters from the late fifties through the eighties. Even when Labor did manage to win, and win big as in 1945, they could only hold on to power for six years as opposed to the Conservatives' hold on government which has lasted over seventeen years. It appeared at one time that the Labor party was content with being the permanent party of the opposition. The Labor Party has been strong enough since 1945 to overpower the Liberal and Social Democrat Parties, but not powerful or eager enough to make the necessary sacrifices to take office. Through ideological, structural, and personal problems and social trends, the Labor Party has witnessed its own decline in the last few decades. Fortunately, since the party's nadir in 1983, it has somewhat painfully transformed itself into a party with a real chance of success in the upcoming election.

The first factor in Labor's decline was the deterioration of traditional working class support. In the early twentieth century, most individuals firmly belonged to the working class. The creation of the Labor party was intended to give this majority a vehicle through which to voice its opinions and organize support. As the century progressed more and more individuals began to raise themselves out of the working class and into a relatively new and increasingly powerful middle class. This transformation was so rapid that by 1976, forty-five percent of the occupied population consisted of non-manual workers, although social mobility patterns did not change so drastically (Jacques 1981). Many of these white collar workers consistently sided against the Labor Party; therefore with the rise of affluence, the destruction of a large portion of the Labor Party occurred which added to the opposition's strength.

Arguably one of the most important factors in assisting individuals to move from the ranks of the working class to the middle class was the apparent revolution in educational accessibility (Seyd and Whiteley 1992). With more educational opportunities available, more working class children entered professions that

brought with them very attractive salaries. Labor stood for improving the conditions of the working class, but many of these new professionals no longer concerned themselves with improving the living standards of a class to which they did not belong. These new middle class members saw their economic prosperity increase under Conservative rule. Almost unfairly the Conservative Party enjoyed its association with images of economic prosperity.

Ironically, Labor's traditional association with the working class also contributed to its decline in the 1980's. Labor's association with the working class "... stamps it with an aura of sectionalism and narrowness, at a time when people see opportunities for advancement opening before them as never before" (Abrams, R. 1960). Another surprising trend occurred within the party system. Most individuals think of the political right as being adverse to change because the current system benefits them, and the left as being the creators and architects of change to alter the system more towards equality. Recently, especially in the 1980's, the roles of the two parties were reversed. The Conservatives brought about change which in some peoples' eyes meant progress and innovation, while the Labor Party appeared to be static and rotting from within.

One major factor in the Labor's decline was its lack of leadership and internal unity. Much of this could have been exaggerated in the media, but a significant extent of this criticism was very real. The Conservatives were portrayed as a united, slick machine, while Labor appeared to be a tea kettle ready to explode, but with no one to take it off the burner. To a large extent this could be attributed to the fact that parties on the left are inherently less stable, they contain more radical and revolutionary viewpoints. This was especially evident in the late seventies when different individuals were struggling to have their views accepted by the rest of the Labor Party. The real devastation came from the fact that there was no strong, skillful leader who was able to unite the different factions. The lack of party unity and leadership were the two main factors why Britain's Labor party fared worse than other socially democratic parties within Europe.

Other commonly emphasized problems plaguing the Labor party were Labor's ineffective organization, and the large amount of money spent on Conservative "propaganda." While it is undeniable that the Conservative Party has consistently spent more on advertising, especially national advertising, than the Labor Party, the effectiveness of this strategy is still open to considerable doubt. What might be more skillfully argued is that the Conservative slogans have had more psychological impact on voters' images of the parties. In regard to Labor's lack of professional organization, there is also much disagreement about the extent of its disorganization and the impact this may have had on Labor's decline. In *Defeat From the Jaws of Victory*, Heffernan and Marqusee argue that in 1991 Labor's organization was at the brink of collapse. They believe that attendance at party meetings was poor, that funding for political education was at an all-time low, and that the party was running a decent size deficit. Conversely, Seyd and Whiteley in

Labor Grass Roots believe that in recent years the party has successfully improved recruitment, organization, and communication within the party. Instead they believe that Labor's party structure was the largest reason for its decline. They are apprehensive at the fact that the Labor leadership is concentrating too much power and effort into the national party and national campaigns. They feel that part of the reason for Labor's decline in number of voters has come from the fact that there have not been ample incentives for individuals to become involved as party members at the local level. Since party members organize groups to vote during elections, they feel that the decline in party membership has caused a decline in Labor's votes. Conversely, a decline in party membership has also been experienced by the Conservative Party, yet they have continued to win elections.

Finally, the most convincing and fundamental reason for Labor's decline was its heroic insistence on maintaining its commitment to policies which had become popular. Many Labor leaders would not deviate from the tradition of having the Labor Party stand for its own principles and beliefs. They felt that any deviation from this principle would render the party disloyal and useless (Hobsbawm 1989). These were the individuals who were more eager to stand in opposition for what they believed people wanted, but did not know, as opposed to standing in government for what they knew people wanted. They realized it was a difficult task to convince the voters that their ideas would positively revolutionize the country, but they were only too eager to wait for that glorious day in which they could bask in their accomplishments after successfully implementing their policies. These men should be recognized for their principle, yet criticized for their incomplete grasp of reality. The most basic reason a political party exists as an institution is to win in order to implement its own policies (Marquand 1991). With this in mind, it is difficult to achieve success without some degree of compromise in one's political ideas. It is a difficult and uneven path between the two extremes, but it is the only path that leads to political success without a complete abandonment of one's beliefs. Another public image problem of the Labor party was its excessive tendency to hold onto unpopular traditional ideas. An example of this was nationalization. It was not until very recently that clause four of the party's constitution was abandoned. This clause, committing the party seek "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange," had been regarded as political stigma for years before it was finally abandoned. This tendency to regard tradition with such dogmatic respect was also evident in the language in which Labor had always expressed its views. To many voters, the Labor party seemed too rigid, too much grounded in the past to be considered a winnable party in the present.

The Conservative Party currently and in the past has never possessed such ideological luggage or high moral principles. The conservatives' political success in the twentieth century has largely come from the fact that they have always been flexible in adopting popular public policies as their own. The only real ex-

ception to this practice was Mrs. Thatcher. This may be aided by the fact that the Conservatives do not possess a party constitution or the fact that they may feel that it is better to be in power with the opportunity to make policies that being on the sidelines without power.

Fortunately for the Labor Party, Neil Kinnock was elected leader in 1983. Even though he never took the Labor Party into political office, his lasting accomplishment was to make the Labor party competitive with the Conservatives. "Clearly, Kinnock [had] succeeded in adjusting his slow-moving comrades, caught up for too long in destructive introspection, to a changing society and ideological mood" (Morgan 1987). The only problem or grace, depending on how you look at it, was that Kinnock had to suppress many of the factions within the party while adopting policies that were favorable to the public. He crushed the Liverpool Militants while earlier personally shifting from the party left more towards the center right. He reversed the party's views on the European Union, NATO, nuclear weapons, and US non-nuclear military presence in Britain. He attempted to show to the press a united Labor party, while becoming the party's savior through his strong style of leadership that had been absent within the party for such a long time. He brought an aura of professionalism to his party structure and operations while attempting to appeal to a larger public. Within the party, Kinnock enjoyed substantial success, but he could not muster the same support from the general masses of voters. No widely agreed upon reason has developed to explain his lack of appeal to the general masses, yet some influencing factors include his location of birth and education (Wales) and the fact that he naturally attracted a certain amount of distrust after he reversed many of his party's views.

Much of Tony Blair's current success as party leader can be attributed to Neil Kinnock's actions, but Blair has also added another level of voter appeal during his leadership of the party. He has concerned himself with attracting voters not satisfying party members' concerns. He has the desire and will to win. He clearly refers to his party as New Labor, which he hopes will rid him and his party of all the stigmas that are attached to Old Labor. Along this line of New Labor, he emphasizes and embraces the new age of technology and the improvements it is supposed to bring with it. Not all of Labor's current success can be attributed to the party. One large reason for Labor's current substantial lead in the polls is the appearance of the Conservative party as tired and worn out. People have experienced seventeen years of Conservative rule and are anxious for a change. Tony Blair is more than ready to provide that change.

Labor's decline from the fifties to the eighties was most directly affected by a lack of unity, no effective leader (besides Harold Wilson), a decline in its voter base, an image problem, and most importantly unyielding ideological beliefs. Neil Kinnock started to reverse Labor's skid by making difficult decisions like compromising on some of the traditions and ideologies of the party. He began to speak to the advocates of change as opposed to its opponents (Marquand 1991). Tony

Blair has continued Labor's transformation with such success that the Labor party is currently heavily favored to become the next government. Labor has put on its uniform for war but in the process has shed many thick layers of idealism and tradition.

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